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TOWN CLERK, ACTON

## CHOOSE YOUR OWN ACTON: PUBLIC WORKSHOP Alternatives for Action

Thursday, June 23, 2011, 6:30 p.m.  
Acton Town Hall, Room #204

**Purpose:** The purpose of this meeting was to present three alternative courses of action that would meet the previously developed planning goals in a variety of ways and to differing degrees. The main objective was to seek input on these alternatives as we move forward in the process of selecting a preferred course of action. This workshop represents a continuation of the community conversation that will result in formulating recommendations for a comprehensive community plan for the future of Acton.

### **Process**

Prior to the discussion, the Consultants and committee members presented a PowerPoint slide show summarizing the process to date and the alternatives to be discussed at the meeting. Information in the slides was also summarized in handouts distributed to participants.

The presentation was followed by small break out groups, where among other things, attendees were invited to discuss the alternatives with an assigned partner. They were then asked to evaluate these using a worksheet as a guide. Finally facilitators led the small group discussions of the alternatives using a series of exercises designed to further understand people's thoughts and opinions regarding the alternatives.

Following the small group discussions the group reconvened and continued to discuss the alternative that was selected by the majority, including how to improve upon it, what concerned people about it, and how future trends may influence the Town's growth and development.

The forum was well attended and was characterized by a high energy level and productive dialogue. Over one hundred (100) people were in attendance. The discussion was lively and participants seemed very engaged. Their contributions to the process were productive and thoughtful.

There was general consensus regarding the overall direction people desired the Town to take, as well as a sense communicated that participants feel strongly that there is a need for additional opportunities to gather, to feel more connected as a community, and a desire to become more proactive in planning the Town's future.

## Key Themes:

The following are the key themes that emerged from the discussion at the public workshop. Input was solicited in a number of ways (see appendices for more detailed notes and a summary of the alternatives):

### Alternative 3 clearly preferred

What people seemed to appreciate most about this alternative:

- Community gathering, qualities including vibrant people-oriented villages with places to go and opportunities to gather and mingle, including opportunities for more theater and music
- Energy savings due to walkability
- Protection of open space in outer areas
- Efficient use of infrastructure

Overall seemed to want to **also focus on:**

- Open space preservation/acquisition
- Preservation of historic character through historic preservation efforts and strong design review
- Employment-oriented development
- Limiting growth and protecting rural characteristics
- Sidewalks/bikeways/public transport (Minuteman van), traffic calming/mitigation

What people seemed to want to pull in were their **CONCERNS** regarding:

- Preservation of open space
- Ensuring that Alt. 3 is feasible
  - Relying solely on zoning and incentives for Alt. 3 might not work
  - Feeling that more needs to be done to make it work (review the 1990 Master Plan emphasis on village development and why that didn't work)
  - Concern that Alt 3 will result in development in both the villages and other areas in town

### Additional Issues

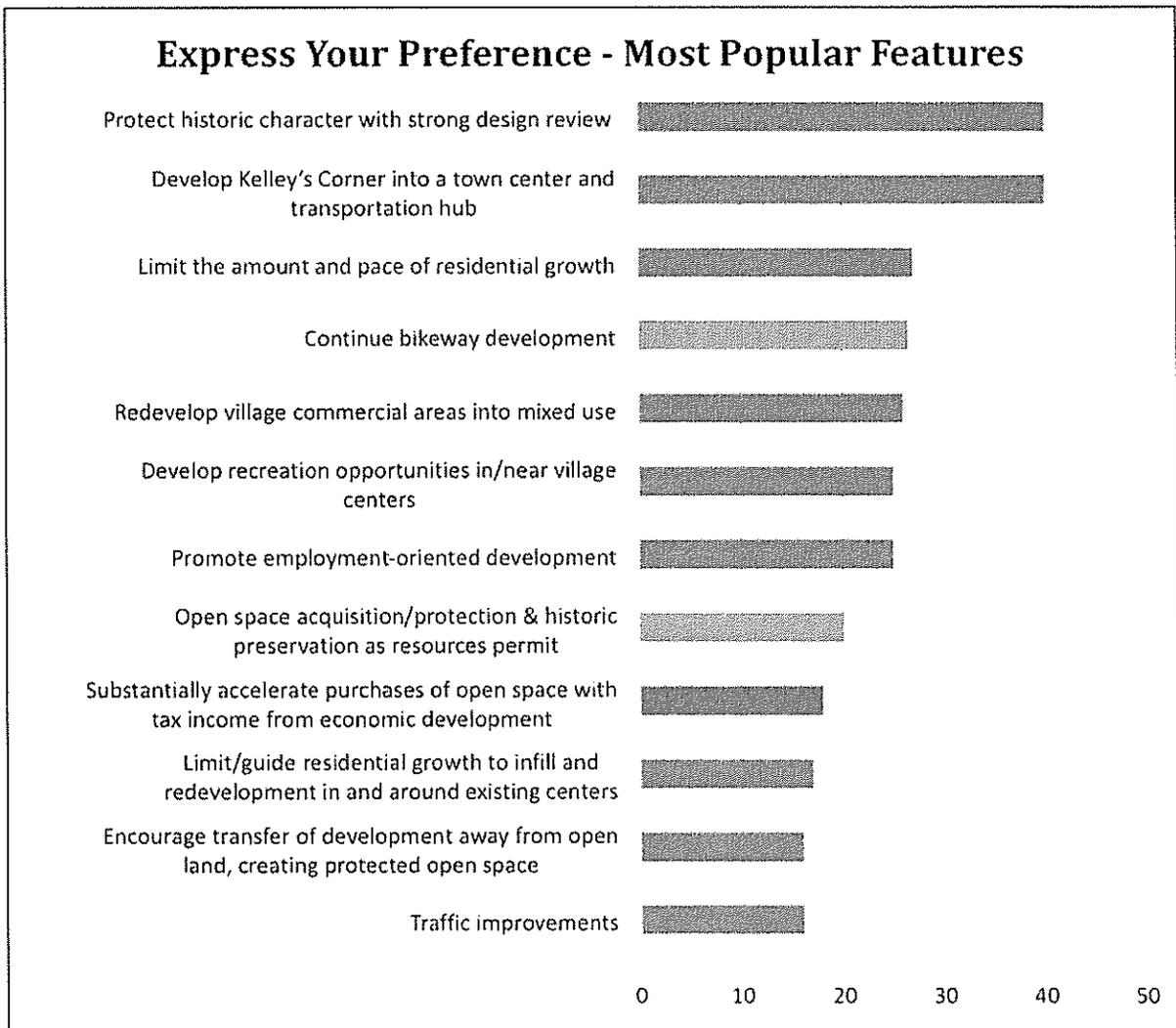
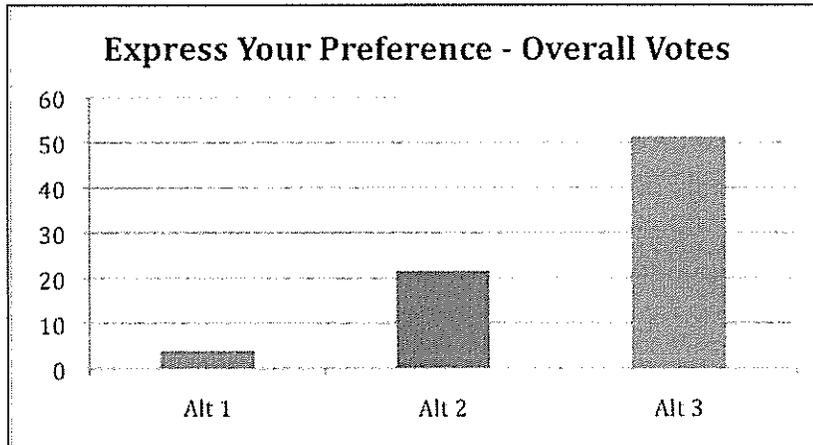
- Most participants seem to support the creation of a joint community/senior center. Suggested locations include village center, NARA and K-mart.
- Not many participants responded to the question regarding emergency response to North Acton and of those, there was no clear majority opinion.
- In terms of additional service and facility needs participants called for gathering places and better maintenance of existing facilities.

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**EXPRESS YOUR PREFERENCE - TOTAL NUMBER OF "DOTS"<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Alt 1</b>	<b>4</b>
Continue bikeway development	<b>26 1/2</b>
Open space acquisition/protection & historic preservation as resources permit	<b>20</b>
Small-scale affordable housing	14
Small scale commercial development	10
Sidewalk extension at current rate	8 1/2
Extend MinuteVan shuttle	8
Clustered residential development	7
<b>Alt 2</b>	<b>21 2/3</b>
Limit the amount and pace of residential growth	<b>27</b>
Promote employment-oriented development	<b>25</b>
Substantially accelerate purchases of open space with tax income from economic development	<b>18</b>
Traffic improvements	<b>16</b>
Focus effort on traffic improvements	5
Limited sidewalk expansion	5
More detached, often large, single-family houses	3
<b>Alt 3</b>	<b>51 1/3</b>
Develop Kelley's Corner into a town center and transportation hub	<b>40</b>
Protect historic character with strong design review	<b>40</b>
Redevelop village commercial areas into mixed use	<b>26</b>
Develop recreation opportunities in/near village centers	<b>25</b>
Limit/guide residential growth to infill and redevelopment in and around existing centers	<b>17</b>
Encourage transfer of development away from open land, creating protected open space	<b>16</b>
Concentrate investments on sidewalks and traffic calming and expand MinuteVan shuttle system	0

<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked: "If you had to choose one alternative as the base or foundation to build on – which one would you choose? Use one large green dot to indicate your preferred alternative and five small yellow dots with which to highlight any key features you like best, regardless of which alternative they are listed under."



## Additional Discussion

Following the small group discussions, participants were invited to reconvene as a large group and continue the discussion focusing primarily on the Alternative 3, the one the majority selected as their preferred general direction for the Town's future.

It is important to emphasize that:

- Participants seemed to bring up the concept of needing **places to gather** at every opportunity, that is -- no matter what the question was or how it was asked -- one of the most frequent responses was: "we want more places to gather as a community, both indoor and outdoor"
  - this is one of the main reasons that people seemed to prefer Alternative 3, in that it provided the most opportunities for such gathering
  - there was some discussion regarding the need for indoor gathering spaces (e.g. community/senior center received the most attention)
- While most people preferred Alternative 3, and very few preferred Alternative 1, there were several who either preferred Alternative 2 or felt certain features of this alternative were important and desirable; these included
  - **open space protection and acquisition**
    - Needing further clarification is whether people want the open space to be protected mostly for conservation land, passive or active recreation? Do they feel it is mostly to look at (and contributing to town character and/or would they like to use it in particular ways?)? Understanding this would help with prioritization of parcels to protect/acquire
  - **employment-oriented development**
    - people liked this feature because of the potential tax revenue it generated and because of the opportunities it could provide to reduce commuting time

In addition to wanting to bring in features of Alternative 2 and even some from Alternative 1, thus creating a "hybrid" alternative, several participants expressed concerns regarding the **feasibility** of Alternative 3 (even though they preferred it). The **main concerns** seem to be:

- Concern that relying solely on zoning and incentives might not work
- Feeling that more needs to be done to make it work (review the 1990 Master Plan emphasis on village development and why that didn't work)
- Concern that Alt 3 will result in development in both the villages but may fail to constrain development in other areas
- Concern regarding aesthetics (e.g. historic preservation & design review)

Additionally, when asked which alternative supports Acton's resilience for the next generation in terms of the natural environment, town character, economic viability, and social fabric (see Appendix), the majority chose Alternative 3 except in the case of the natural environment in which case the majority selected Alternative 2 as being more resilient, presumably because they felt that it was more effective in protecting open space.

## Wild Cards

Participants were asked to list some potential sources of future change that are not easy to predict and that, if they came to be, would affect the Town's future growth and development. Concerns regarding unpredictable future forces seemed to cluster around a few main themes; these are:

- School population
  - o quality of schools falling
  - o classroom size way larger
  - o school enrollment
  - o quality of schools – special ed population going up
  - o school population keeps rising
- Economy
  - o drying up of jumbo mortgages
  - o protracted economic stagnation
  - o inflation
  - o government collapse (less money for towns, <>)
  - o falling house values
- Energy
  - o energy availability
  - o cost of gas increases
- Water
  - o contaminated water
  - o water supply issues
  - o water table
- Natural disaster
  - o Tornados
  - o climate change/weather extremes
- Other
  - o uncontrollable development
  - o Concord rotary bypass – traffic increase sprawl
  - o clustered living
  - o 40B – large (2)
  - o unintended consequences
  - o unfunded liabilities (e.g.: pensions)

## Notes from Large Group Discussion

### **“What is best about Alternative 3?”**

- most concerned about fostering communication and a sense of community
  - o answer may lie in creating more opportunities for community gathering aspects
- could create vibrant, diverse village from ground up
- like the village concept, connectivity, sidewalks
  - o how to solve aesthetic issue of densification
  - o need to include a community center and not simply rely on the schools for access to recreation. Center should be located in a location easily accessible by walking or biking
  - o need to relate together more

### **“How can we make Alternative 3 better?”**

- need to incorporate urban design/placemaking
- Alt 3 depends on retail + housing, need to incorporate some economic development of Alt 2
- loved Kelley’s corner idea, but still needs to address open space
  - o need specific measures to preserve open space
- we’re part of a busier region – need to work w/ other towns – how Concord + Littleton develop will affect Acton
- the new train station development and improvements to Rt.2 will also affect Acton
- focus on open space, including open space in villages
  - o Stonefield farm, Pricilla Wood’s farm in West Acton, Mead land, Moritz land
  - o East Acton 32-acre Moritz property
- concern about the feasibility of relying on market prices and incentives. What about public development?
  - o Lincoln Crossroads – example of village development supported by public land trust
- could consider public subsidy/ municipality role in TDR? Taxes from commercial development in 2 could help with this
- need to look at what worked + didn’t work in 90s plan

### **“Which Village Centers go first?”**

- Kelley’s Corner – already commercial use there – less potential conflict with Village character + open space
  - o Lease from Stop + Shop covers large portion of Kelley’s Corner
- West Acton – sees the increase in vibrancy + small businesses lately – easier to realize potential sooner than at Kelley’s Corner
  - o Like Concord center feel – most like West Acton Center
- South Acton – train + bike trail potential
- Rt. 2A in N. Acton – lot’s of people there
- Why not create a new village? Nagog – has commercial, retail, Avalon + Littleton development, already developed, view of pond

## Back of the Agenda

Participants were asked a series of questions on the back of their agendas regarding capital expenditures. They were invited to submit these written answers. The following is a compilation of the responses.

### Whether, how, and where to provide a new community center and/or senior center:

	# of responses	Comments
Yes	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like to see a combination of both</li> <li>• Community center w/ "senior areas"</li> <li>• Near town center if possible</li> <li>• North Acton seems to be in need of a covered community center. It is heavily populated by seniors, so this population should be supported.</li> <li>• Yes, probably higher taxes. Where = near or in a village center.</li> <li>• Senior center seems a good idea</li> <li>• Senior center with parking</li> <li>• Community center for adults with meeting space (media room, movies!), fitness center, lunchroom, small meeting room (for say, card games); a place for "formal" programs as well as casual gathering</li> <li>• Yes, debt exclusion, NARA park</li> <li>• Community pool, recreation center would be amazing asset. Maybe this needs to be at NARA but would be nice to have something elsewhere</li> <li>• Yes. West Acton but I don't necessarily see a community as a priority. The school in many ways functions as community center.</li> <li>• Turn NARA into a pool or K-Mart into a pool/gym</li> <li>• There could be a representative, contact for receiving input, suggestions and feedback; there can e a small community center for this.</li> </ul>
No	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No use buildings + parks we already have</li> <li>• I think we have to be better about multi-purpose facilities, like using the library, schools + other town buildings for other purposes.</li> <li>• No. Acton does not need a community/senior center; it doesn't have an appropriate location</li> <li>• Let the private sector take care of it</li> <li>• Seem to already be a lot of resources for both</li> </ul>

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**Whether, how, and where to provide better emergency response to North Acton, including potential new Fire Station:**

Whether or not	How	Where	Additional Comments
Yes - 6	Taxes bond	Near NARA 2A + 27 near to the highly populated North Acton At least an EMS station in N Acton	Ambulance service is more important
No - 5			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't build it only marginal improvement for high cost.</li> <li>• No money</li> <li>• I don't think we fully utilize the assets we have. Do we really need another fire truck?</li> <li>• No, focus on paramedics</li> </ul>
Other - 2			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phase Out center station slowly</li> <li>• I don't know enough about current needs/response time to make a sensible judgment</li> </ul>

***Do we want/need more recreation? If yes, what kind and where should it be located? Should NARA be further developed?***

- **Golf course** – use as community center, already has buildings
- I would love to see more family friendly and diverse **large playgrounds** (2x)
- **NARA needs more trees.** Expand for more fields if possible – but don't take town trees or forest to do it
- **Senior recreation** + physical therapy facility could be purchased.
- **Rail trails** are highest priority; safe bicycle + walking connections; pitch and putt **golf course**
- How about some **pubs**?
- Yes we need **tennis courts** in N Acton; NARA Park would be a great area for that. **Pool** would be good too. (2x)
- No, **use buildings and parks we already have.**
- No **retain open space but recreation just adds traffic.**
- No – wrong location
- Yes – for adults – more **bike trails, walking trails**; NARA – no.
- Senior center should be more than that, great opportunity to bring generations together, make it a **community mixing center**
- Is current area effectively + consistently used? Instead more recreation areas are good, but **I don't know if we need more.**

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- **Improve biking + walking options**
- **YMCA**
- NARA is great as it is. Would love **more open space/park/field near Kelley's Corner**

### ***Are there any other such service and/or service facility needs you feel should be addressed?***

- Acton needs to find ways to “bind” the community so that families, elderly, children, have safe, entertaining **gathering places**.
- More **community gardens** (2)
- Plan for **town hall** growth
- Plan for more **meeting spaces**
- Improvements to **public transport** around town (3), bike lanes, sidewalks
- I would love to have a **central area** in town with mixed use – shops, apartments, and outdoor cafés or taverns – places where people can sit outside in the summer, have coffee or a glass or wine +listen to street musicians.
- Better maintenance of **existing facilities**
- **Roads** are a wreck, sand everywhere, flooding.
- Save buildings and **heritage**
- Acton is going to have trouble meeting needs of its **schools** in the future.
- Put resources into **library** before spending more to develop NARA
- Amazing, vibrant **theater** community in Acton would be great to find way for town to support this.

### ***Additional Comments***

- Enforce **sign bylaws**
- Create more **town center amenities**
- Improve **walkability** on South Acton – improve crosswalks, islands, large plots with flowers at halfway point or central street crossing
- Very **concerned** that tools to encourage concentrated growth will not work and that we will get **more growth** in both villages and outlying access.
- How do we **create more ways for people to find each other and connect** if we don't have children in schools, belong to a church or a town committee? I like the idea of Portland, ME. Time bank, so people can offer and receive services through this, discover + create new connections. Also – definitely places to walk + bike around town.
- **Loss of historic aesthetic = loss of property value** (2)
- **Development DOES NOT pay**
- Already **tried to concentrate growth in villages** and it did not work
- **Traffic mitigation** is important to me
- Feels like Framingham
- Not worth holding onto a house here!
- School age population and over 65 represent 1/3 of population but most town resources allocated into them, not the other 2/3. **More budget for town services we all use** – library, highway dept, town clerk's office,

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health dept, building dept, etc - Yes, at expense of schools. Many taxpayers consume few services yet pay for all. Empty nesters could become active town volunteers. Also would like incentives to change culture that the week your child graduates high school you sell your house – encourage people to stay and invest in the town.

- We need to **expand sewers** (3)
- We need to be **concerned about development** in Marlborough and Southborough that will put many more gallons of sewage into treatment plant thus **polluting Assabet** even more
- Add **trees**; preserve **historic character**. Be serious about **design and zoning**.
- **Quality of life** and **road safety**.
- **Garbage collection**
- **Kelley's Corner, town centers, sidewalks**

## Other Great Ideas

*Participants were given a note card on which to write “other great ideas.” The following ideas were contributed:*

- Local, small-scale energy generation (geothermal, solar)
- Redevelopment of moribund commercial cities as potential food-production enterprises
- On-site electricity generation, with net metering
- Use of land site for municipal power generation
- New business + jobs connected with the above
- Take “Kmart” by eminent domain – we don’t need Kmart – we do need basketball courts
- Create a biotech park at WR Grace land – we need the tax revenue – and the jobs
- I’ve heard a lot of concern that the residents bear a heavy burden of tax for the schools. But I believe the schools are such a strength of Acton that they’ve become a part of Acton’s character. I would like to leverage that strength into a marketable commodity. For example, I’d like to see Acton start a school of citizenship, along the lines of Kennedy School of Government. Develop that such that Acton becomes a focal point for candidates seeking election. This way we draw taxes from a “business” as well as revenue from visitors who are drawn by the potential speakers.
- Make provisions for parks + playgrounds – recreation facilities must be emphasized
- More bike lanes + sidewalks!
- Slow growth!!
- Design = zoning + historic preservation must improve!!
- Make NARA a pool!
- Look at open space + contiguous space in adjacent towns
- Value open space purchases near town borders above ... near town center

*APPENDICES*



## ALTERNATIVE 1 Disperse Growth: Extend Current Trends / Continue Present Planning Policies

*Focus on:*



*Continuing use of cluster zoning to protect open space*



*Encouraging small scale commercial development, especially in villages*



*Continuing open space acquisition/protection*

This alternative continues existing policies and practices governing the type and location of development, resulting in incremental changes that continue recent trends.

## Key Features

### Residential

- Encouragement of **clustering** when new residential development is proposed
- **Small-scale affordable housing** without a strong geographic focus\*

### Commercial

- **Small scale commercial** development in scattered locations.

### Open Space and Historic

- Continued **open space** acquisition/protection and **historic preservation** as opportunities arise and resources permit.

### Transportation/Circulation

- Continued extending of **sidewalks** at current rate of construction
- Continued **bikeway** development
- Extension of funding for **MinuteVan shuttle** at current level of service

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\*The Avalon 40B development was an exception to this trend.

## ALTERNATIVE 1 Disperse Growth, continued

### Positive Impacts

- Continued **encouragement of Planned Conservation Residential Communities** as the preferred method for residential development. (Over 600 acres of **open space** have been preserved to date with use of Acton's cluster zoning provisions).
- **No new legislation** or administrative support required.
- Town builds on its **existing dispersed pattern**.
- **Continues past and current practices** of effective planning and development regulation.
- Because of declining school enrollments and less need for capital investments, this alternative **increases fiscal capacity by \$5 million** compared to today.

### Negative Impacts

- **Traffic** will become more of a problem than now.
- Development in villages and Kelley's Corner may not fit with or improve their **character**.
- Less efficient use of **public infrastructure and services**

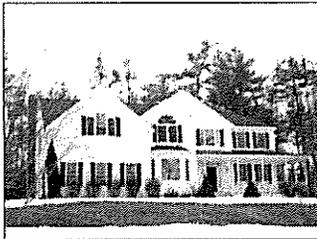
### Typical Outcomes

- **Villages** continue to look much as they do today.
- **Kelley's Corner** changes only incrementally.
- **School enrollments** decline gradually.
- **Home values** (adjusted for inflation) similar to today.
- **Large parcels of open land** likely to develop, potentially with protection of part of the parcel through cluster zoning.

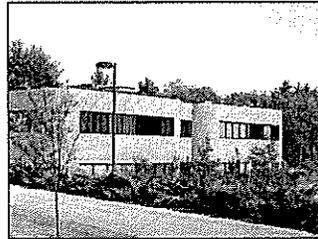


## **ALTERNATIVE 2 Limit Growth:** Limit Residential / Expand Commercial / Acquire Open Space

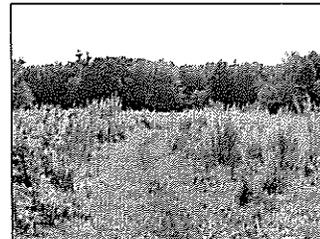
*Focus on:*



*Limiting the residential growth rate; no change in type or size*



*Encouraging employment-oriented low-impact commercial development*



*Increasing open space acquisition*

This alternative aims to retain the existing settlement pattern and avoids changing the existing physical character, and consequently the demographic character, of the Town. Its chief focus is to control residential growth in order to curb the demands on existing facilities and services. It also encourages employment-oriented commercial development to provide fiscal benefits and finance acquisition of open space and trail easements.

### **Key Features**

#### **Residential**

- **Limit the amount and pace** of residential growth without limiting the type and size of new housing units, resulting in **more detached, often large, single-family houses**

#### **Commercial**

- Promote **employment-oriented development** (e.g. high tech/ R&D offices) in areas that don't directly impact neighborhoods: Great Road, Nagog Park, Powdermill, and large commercial parcels on Rt. 2

#### **Open Space**

- Use tax income generated from economic development and higher Community Preservation Act surcharges to **substantially accelerate purchases of open space**

#### **Transportation/Circulation**

- Focus effort on **traffic improvements** and **limited sidewalk expansion**

## ALTERNATIVE 2 Limit Growth, continued

### Positive Impacts

- **Slower growth** based on substantial investment in acquisition of open space.
- Retention of key **open space** parcels.
- **Limited growth in traffic** in residential areas.
- Later and potentially lower **residential build-out**.
- Potential **local employment** opportunities which would reduce commuting time and carbon emissions related to commuter driving.
- Because of lower school enrollments, fewer new housing units and more commercial development, partially offset by open acquisition needed to limit growth this alternative **increases fiscal capacity by \$2.5 million**, compared to today

### Negative Impacts

- **Market** for large scale office/R&D **is uncertain**
- **More vigilance and more staffing** required in reviewing development proposals and building permit limitations.
- **Less emphasis** on transportation measures (such as **sidewalks, bikeways, and shuttle** service) that would encourage less driving than today.
- Potential increases in **traffic** at some locations due to commercial development

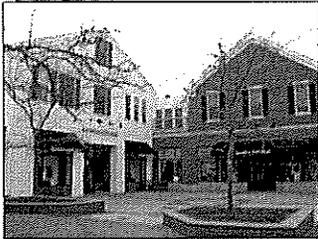
### Typical Outcomes

- **Villages** continue to look much as they do today.
- **Kelley's Corner** changes only incrementally.
- **School enrollments** decline more than other alternatives.
- **Home values** (adjusted for inflation) increase somewhat compared to today.
- Some **large parcels of open land** likely to develop, potentially with protection of part of the parcel through cluster zoning; other parcels protected by purchase.
- **Large office/R&D** built on south side of Rte 2 (Auto Auction and adjacent commercial parcels)

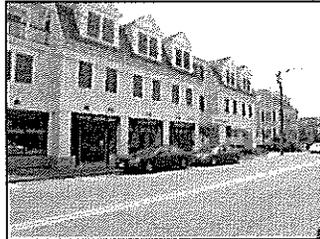


## ALTERNATIVE 3 Concentrate Growth: Guide Growth to Key Town Centers

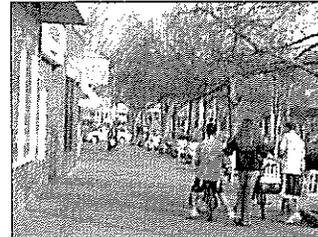
### *Focus on:*



*Directing residential growth to mixed use infill and redevelopment*



*Transforming existing commercial development to fit village character*



*Emphasizing walking, biking and public transportation*

This alternative aims to guide growth to key town centers (such as Kelley's Corner, South Acton and West Acton) with strong design review to protect the Town's historic fabric and existing neighborhoods. It includes a variety of housing types including smaller units together with small scale commercial development in mixed-use village centers. It has more sidewalks and bike paths.

## Key Features

### **Residential**

- Limit and guide growth geographically through **infill and redevelopment** in and around existing centers (West Acton, South Acton and Kelley's Corner)

### **Commercial**

- Develop **Kelley's Corner** into a **town center** and **transportation hub**
- Redevelop **village commercial** areas into **mixed use** that respects the existing village character

### **Open Space and Historic Preservation**

- Use strong **design review** to protect **historic character**
- Develop opportunities for **recreation near village centers** and small vest pocket parks and tot lots in villages
- Encourage **transfer of development** away from open land to desired growth centers

### **Transportation**

- Concentrate transportation investments such as **sidewalks** and **traffic calming** in and around the villages
- Build **MinuteVan shuttle** into a more comprehensive system

## ALTERNATIVE 3 Concentrate Growth, continued

### Positive Impacts

- Each **village** has its own distinct **identity** and new development is sited and designed to enhance and protect existing residential and **historic character**.
- More **efficient** in the use of Town facilities and services.
- More **sustainable** development pattern.
- **Utilizes existing sewer capacity** in South Acton and Kelley's Corner.
- The type and location of new residential development better **fits Acton's changing demographics** (i.e., stage in the life-cycle and socio-economic background).
- More **opportunities for public gathering**, communication, and walking will be provided.
- Because of lower school enrollments and smaller units, partially offset by needed infrastructure investments, this alternative **increases fiscal capacity** by **\$3.9 million**, compared to today.

### Negative Impacts

- **Possible increased traffic** congestion, traffic safety and parking issues **in the centers** that receive new development.
- Potentially higher level of residential **buildout** because incentives will be needed to transfer development rights to centers.
- **More vigilance and more staffing required** to review development proposals and achieve adherence to new design standards.
- Significant **public infrastructure improvements** (such as sewers sidewalks and streetscape) **needed** in some of the centers.

### Typical Outcomes

- **Villages** become denser with redevelopment of non-residential parcels; stronger design review preserves and enhances existing character.
- **Kelley's Corner** becomes a busy, walkable town center.
- **School enrollments** decline more than Disperse Growth, less than Limit Growth.
- **Home values** (adjusted for inflation) similar to today's outside villages; may increase relative to today's in villages.
- Some **large parcels of open land** likely to develop, potentially with protection of part of the parcel through cluster zoning; other parcels protected by transfer of development to key town centers.